

Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA)

MADA: No improvement in Media Freedoms in Palestine during November

Ramallah – 08 December 2011: November has seen no improvement for Palestinian journalists or media freedoms in the occupied Palestinian territories, reminding those in the field of journalism of the high price paid for disseminating the truth. Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) in the West Bank committed a number of violations in November, whilst a serious clamp down on freedom of expression was seen in the Gaza Strip with a series of violations committed against journalists at the hands of the intelligence services.

Continued Israeli violations against journalists

Israeli occupation forces committed a number of violations against journalists in the past month, including the raid of Reuters photographer Adel Ibrahim Abu Ni'meh's home in Aqbet Jaber refugee camp, Jericho, by a large unit of IOF soldiers on Wednesday 2 November; and an IOF attack against a group of journalists covering the weekly march in the village of Nabi Saleh, northwest of Ramallah on Friday 18 November. The journalists attacked were Associated Press photographer Majdi Ishteieh, Alhayat Aljadedah photographer Issam Rimawi, Reuters photographer Mohamad Turkman, and AP photographer Abbas Momny. Also last month, Marah radio presenter Raed Rateb Al-Sherif was arrested from his home in Hebron city by IOF soldiers on Monday 14 November.

Additionally, an IOF military court on Sunday 13 November issued the decision to renew the administrative detention order of Falasteen newspaper Bureau Chief in West Bank Walid Khalid for a further six months. This is the second consecutive renewal of the detention order by the court against Khalid.

Escalation of media freedoms violations in the Gaza Strip

All Palestinian led violations committed against journalists during November - with the exception of the postponement of the trial of Radio Bethlehem 2000 director George Kanawati on 30 November 2011 until 24 January 2012 - were committed by security services of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip, including detention, interrogation and the prohibition of a workshop held by the Journalists' Syndicate.

Internal security services of the Gaza Strip arrested a number of Palestinian journalists including Aswar Press correspondent Ziad Awad, who was taken from his home on Tuesday 21 November; freelance journalist Mahmoud Al-Barbar, arrested Thursday 24 November; and Chief Editor of Al-Naher Agency Hani Al-Agha, who was released after one week in detention.

In addition to arrests, Aswar Press Agency supervisor and correspondent of the Lebanese Al-Quds magazine, Manal Khamis, was summoned for investigation three times by security services between 28 November and 1 December 2011.

Internal security personnel additionally prevented the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate from holding a workshop in commemoration of the World Day to End Impunity on Wednesday 23 November 2011.

Conclusion and recommendations:

The Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA) reiterates its condemnation of all violations of the right to freedom of opinion and expression in the Palestinian territories, particularly the Israeli violations which constitute a real threat to the lives and wellbeing of journalists in the line of duty.

MADA also wishes to express its condemnation of the escalation of violations and campaign of harassment against journalists in the Gaza Strip, which stand in direct contravention to the right of freedom of expression guaranteed under Article 19 of Palestinian Basic Law.

MADA calls upon all concerned international bodies to make a concerted effort in pressuring the Israeli government to end all violations of freedom of expression in the occupied Palestinian territories and hold offenders accountable in accordance with international law. MADA additionally calls upon the Palestinian authorities to respect media freedoms as mandated under Palestinian law and bring an immediate end to its campaign of harassment against journalists.

Violation details and testimony

(2 November) A large unit of Israeli occupation forces raided Reuters photographer home Adel Ibrahim Abu Ni'meh on the morning of Wednesday 2 November and searched his home in Aqbet Jaber refugee camp, Jericho. Abu Ni'meh told MADA that a large unit of IOF came to his home at about two o'clock in the morning and violently knocked on the main door, causing it to break. Abu Ni'meh went to investigate the disturbance and found a large unit of IOF soldiers outside his home. Upon entering, three of the soldiers held Abu Ni'meh outside and ordered his wife and children to stay in one room of the house whilst they hastily searched the house. The soldiers then ordered Abu Ni'meh inside to observe as they searched the house more thoroughly.

Abu Ni'meh added: "It took about two hours, between searching the home and asking about my work. I have a three and half year old son, he was terrified when they entered the house because of their uniforms, some were wearing balaclava's".

(14 November) IOF military court on Sunday 13 November issued the decision to renew the administrative detention order of Falasteen newspaper Bureau Chief in West Bank Walid Khalid for a further six months. This is the second consecutive renewal of the detention order by the court against Khalid, who has not been charged for any offences. Khaled was arrested on 8 May 2011 after IOF soldiers raided his home in Salfit, near Nablus, and transferred to Nafha prison, where he remains until now.

(14 Nov) Israeli occupation forces arrested radio Marah presenter Raed Rateb Al-Sherif from his home in Hebron city, West Bank on Monday 14 November 2011. In a statement, Raed's father Rateb Al-Sherif told MADA that a unit of Israeli occupation soldiers arrived at his home at 1:30 am and ordered everyone to evacuate the house, including the children. Soldiers questioned Al-Sherif about his son's whereabouts and he informed them that Raed lives in another house. Soldiers ordered Al-Sherif escort them to his son's home where they knocked firmly on the door, when Raed answered they arrested him. Al-Sherif added: "I told them to knock gently on the door as my son's wife is pregnant, but they told me to keep quiet and carried on knocking loudly. My son's wife had to be taken to hospital as the stress almost induced a miscarriage, her health is stable now however she is still suffering psychologically; she is always crying. My son is now in Ofer prison".

(16 Nov) Israeli occupation police arrested Quds TV Ahrar Program Presenter Israa Salhab on Wednesday 16 November 2011, after summoning her for investigation at their headquarters in Jerusalem. Israeli occupation authorities extended the detention of Salhab on Monday 21 November 2011 for a further four days without charge. Her brother Suhaib Salhab informed MADA that the Israeli court in Jerusalem issued the decision to extend her detention until 25 November without pressing any formal charges. Salhab was released on 28 November 2011.

(18 Nov) the IOF attacked a group of journalists during their coverage to the weekly march in Nabi Saleh village, northwest of Ramallah city, on Friday 18 November 2011. Associated press photographer Majdi Ishteieh said that the IOF threw a barrage of tear gas grenades at the journalists, causing contusions on his leg. Ishteieh added: "My colleagues - Alhayat Aljadedah photographer Issam Rimawi, Reuter's photographer Mohamad Turkman and AP photographer Abbas Momny - also suffered moderate asphyxiation from the gas".

(21 November) Internal security services and police of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip arrested Aswar Press Agency correspondent Ziad Awad from his home on Tuesday, 21 November 2011. His wife Maysoon Awad said that about 12 men belonging to the police and internal security services raided their home in the evening and arrested her husband after searching their house. They also confiscated his computer, cameras, laptop, two cell phones, and CDs, in addition to some papers. She added: "They did not show a search warrant, but they said that his arrest was at the order of the Attorney General. Later the Red Cross contacted me and told me that my husband was detained in Ansar prison, and is in good health".

(23 Nov) Internal security personnel prevented the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate from holding a workshop in commemoration of the World Day to End Impunity on Wednesday 23 November 2011. A Journalist's Syndicate council member in Gaza Strip, Yousef Al-Ostaz, said that his colleagues Sami Abu Salem and Tahseen Al-Astal were contacted by a member of the Internal Security services who ordered them to cancel the workshop, and said if they wanted to implement any work on behalf of the Syndicate they must first coordinate with "the new transitional council" - a council formed by a group of journalists affiliated with Hamas and Al-Jihad groups after their raid and hostile takeover of the syndicate's headquarter on 11 October 2011. Security representatives also contacted Palestine University and ordered them to cancel a workshop they had scheduled.

(24 Nov) The internal security services of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip arrested the Chief Editor of Al-Naher Agency Hani Al-Agha while he was returning to Gaza from Egypt through the Rafah crossing on Thursday, 24 November 2011. Al-Agha told MADA that he was arrested by members of the internal security services at the crossing and held for half an hour before being taken blindfolded to their headquarters in the city of Rafah. AL-Agha added: "I stayed in jail for three days and no one talked to me, the investigation began on the morning of Sunday 27 November. Investigators asked me about my journalistic work, the financial sources of employer and some personal questions. I remained in detention until Thursday when they told me they were going to release me at eight in the evening on the condition that I sign a pledge to respect the general laws and regulations, they then handed me a summons to the internal security headquarters in Khan Younis for Thursday, 29 December 2011.

(24 Nov) Internal security services of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip arrested freelance journalist Mohmoud Al-Barbar from his home on Thursday 24 November. His brother Qasim Al-Barbar said that three policemen entered their home, introduced themselves as internal security and asked his brother to accompany them. They also confiscated his wife's laptop. Qasim added: "I went on Sunday to the headquarters of the internal Security to inquire about my brother and they told me to bring his clothes as he would remain under investigation for two weeks. On the same day seven people came to my house and showed me a warrant issued by the Attorney General to search the home, they also searched the home of my brother and asked me and his wife to come to their headquarter the next day. When I went there I told them that his wife is pregnant and cannot come, so they interrogated me about my brother and the nature of his work and travel, then I was released".

(28 Nov) Internal security services of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip summoned Aswar Press Agency supervisor and correspondent of the Lebanese Al-Quds magazine Manal Khamis on Monday 28 November 2011. Khamis told MADA that she had received a call from Internal Security and was ordered to go immediately to their headquarters, however she refused and said to the caller that she would not go without a formal summons, which they then sent, so she went along with her husband as requested. Khamis added: "I went with my husband and told to wait, after about an hour they questioned me about my agencies financiers, the names of its employees and the nature of my work with Al-Quds magazine, particularly the news we publish about Hamas. During the investigation they asked my husband to accompany them to our home where they conducted a detailed search and confiscated my computer, 2 cameras, papers and CDs. They then told me to appear again at their headquarters in two days.

Khamis also said that she went again with her husband after two days, arriving at at ten o'clock in the morning as requested, but was told to leave and return after two hours. Upon their return they waited for a further hour before the investigation began. Khamis stated that interrogation concerned the same subject as two days prior and included the accusation that she was working within the Fatah movement, which she denied. Interrogators then threatened to arrest her if she did not cooperate, but she told them "That's all I have", and they released her. Khamis was summoned for investigation three times by security services between 28 November and 1 December 2011."

(30 Nov) The Magistrates Court of Bethlehem decided on 30 November 2011 to again postpone the trial of Radio Bethlehem 2000 director George Canawati on charges of slander. Canawati told MADA that the judge decided to postpone the trial until 24 January 2012 after hearing the testimony of Bethlehem Governor Abdel Fatah Hamayel consultant. The trial comes as a result of a complaint filed against Canawati with the Attorney General by the Governor on Thursday 8 September following a 'Note' Canawati published on his Facebook page concerning the work of the Bethlehem's Directorate of Health and criticising the presence of Israeli products in a meeting he attended with Directorate managers.

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